

## Deeper Understanding in a Time of Pandemic

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*“At the end of the day, we can endure much more than we think we can.”*

*~Frida Kahlo*

My new Frida Kahlo mug, bearing this quote, has proved far more relevant in our current circumstances than when my husband, knowing that I love her work, first brought it home for me last month.

Last week, our first, during the period of now commonplace cancellations and calls for physical distancing, I took a moment to consider Kahlo's words while sipping my second cup of coffee. As an ethics and compliance specialist and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Coordinator, I found inspiration from my morning joe for dealing with these unprecedented times.

Frida Kahlo faced immeasurable difficulties in her life. She contracted polio at age six and as a teenager she was injured in a very serious bus accident. She used crutches and a wheelchair at various times, had more than 30 surgeries, had her leg amputated, and contracted bronchopneumonia toward the end of her life. She died at age 47.

Her life experiences, including the various physical issues she faced, helped inform her exceptional body of work that has become even more beloved in recent years among legions of curators and arts enthusiasts.

This week, I have been reading about how much of the rest of the world is waking up to the difficulties that those in the disability community have faced throughout their lives. While able-bodied individuals are used to full independence in their day-to-day activities, those with disabilities rely on what are known as reasonable accommodations, such as ramps or closed captioning, which government officials and businesses are required to provide wherever possible.

Because of social distancing, we must each put much more thought into how we get our groceries, how we exercise, and how we support children who are now home as a result of school closings. We must see the world through a new lens and carefully think through the details of daily living during the weeks and months ahead.

The deep isolation that people around the world are feeling, perhaps for the first time, is an experience those with disabilities tend to experience with far greater frequency, regardless of whether the barriers to facilities, resources, and programming are visible or invisible.

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Books by mail, online resources, and reliance on delivery services that those with various health issues have been using for years will now be necessitated by physical distancing requirements. Web-based meetings and conferences will likely equalize participation for able-bodied and individuals with disabilities. Children with sensory difficulties, who could find group activities to be overstimulating, may now find greater comfort engaging in virtual activities in the comfort of their own homes.

We must take great care that we ensure that vulnerable populations are considered as we make decisions about cancelling programs and closing libraries and parks. But we can also rely upon the great work that has been done by those with disabilities in obtaining accommodations and fighting for their very inclusion in the public sphere.

Additionally, we have all become far more concerned about the ways in which germs can quickly spread. Thus, engaging in routine tasks safely, such as opening door handles, pressing keypads, pumping gas, and utilizing any number of other shared public resources, have suddenly become mission critical in protecting communities. Those with physical disabilities have found ways of dealing with these kinds of tasks on a regular basis.

This heightened level of global awareness may help us in making greater strides toward universal design and accessibility and on a much faster timetable. This may include an increased reliance on automatic doors, enhanced accessibility in public restrooms, and a greater focus on keeping public spaces clean, which will ultimately make life better for everyone, including but not limited to those with physical disabilities and/or weakened immune systems.

*“Nothing is absolute. Everything changes, everything moves, everything revolves, everything flies and goes away.” ~Kahlo*

Kahlo saw her hopes of becoming a doctor dashed by her health issues, but she turned to her artwork as an outlet for her creativity and her pain. It seems that Kahlo was engaging in art therapy long before it was a recognized field, designed for physical and emotional healing. The world benefitted from her indomitable spirit and her artistic prowess. Kahlo’s ability to view the world from her unique perspective figured heavily in the way that her artwork helps the viewer understand themselves and others.

While we are considering ways to support those in the disability community, let us not just think about the compliance requirements but also be guided by their wisdom in coping with the kinds of difficulties that we are facing in these trying times. We are sure to get through this by relying upon the interconnected global web that each of us is a crucial part of these days. Let’s also seize upon the moment when so many people throughout the world are focused on self-isolation to protect the most vulnerable in our society and continue to consider the critical need for accessibility and inclusiveness as we plan for our facilities, programming and events now and in the future.

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